

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME:

OCTOBER 30, 2022

Don't you like this little guy, Zacchaeus? He is a businessman who climbs a tree to get a glimpse of the traveling Rabbi. Maybe because the picture is a bit comical I can find him charming and sincere. He probably had been content with his public life and was well off financially. But something bugged him and he didn't know what. He's longing for something more in life and hadn't yet found it. And Jesus validates and affirms him. I can feel his sense of being a small, insignificant guy who, all of a sudden, is publicly recognized by a moral authority. "Hey, I can't be so bad".

Then there is the other side of this story. Zacchaeus throws a dinner party and there are both pharisees and other tax collectors present. There are sinners too which, at that time, means those not purified by the law. Here I really struggle to be honest. How would I feel if I were at that dinner? If I saw recognized sinners, politicians who lie, pedophiles, prostitutes, what would I think of Jesus? Would I be comfortable in such a setting? Would I even accept an invitation?

Then comes the most astounding part of this story. Zacchaeus has been changed. He has had a conversion of heart. First of all, he repents of his lifestyle; he is willing to change some of his destructive behavior. Repentance is the first recorded word that both John the Baptist and Jesus had to say when beginning their public ministry. Repent! Repent and believe the good news.

But repentance is only the first step in the conversion process to which Jesus called Zacchaeus and all of us. To embrace conversion is still the call to us, even those who are monks or devoted lay people. We may attend Mass, pray the hours daily, and practice Christian virtues but our underlying myth/worldview/motivation and goals are never really changed. My anger, fear and ego, for instance are merely transferred to now defend my idea of God or religion.

Real conversion to which all Christians are called through Baptism, but not all really embrace, is what other religions call enlightenment or transformation. My consciousness, worldview, motivation, rewards and goals are now characterized by Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God, and practiced by one who loves and is loved by God.

There is another character in this gospel story that we need to recognize. That is the sycamore tree. Trees are very significant in the Bible. In the first Book of Genesis there are the trees of good and evil and the tree of life. The first psalm describes the just person as a tree. There is, of course, the tree of the cross in the gospel and finally, in the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, are the trees in paradise.

To really be converted we must climb a tree and go out on a limb. From that tree where we want to see Jesus, but not get too close, Jesus looks at me. How do I respond when Jesus looks at me? No longer a spectator, we are being looked at. What happens when we expose ourselves to God's gaze?

We are all on Jericho roads making our way through this life. Our contemporary Jericho road is blocked by chaos, broken relationships, a fractured church, experiences of poverty and loneliness, racism and hate crime.

We need to climb a tree of repentance and really see Jesus. God invites us to climb the tree and get above the crowd of unbelief around us so as to find a place that will make it possible to see Jesus and respond to Jesus' invitation.

Jesus' closing words to Zacchaeus are spoken to us when we open our eyes and hearts to Jesus and to the kingdom of God in our daily lives. "Today salvation has come to your house". It really is as easy as climbing a tree and perhaps that is the challenge to us as well. At my age I don't think I can climb trees any longer. But maybe someone can help me. I am never too old to change and be converted.

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